

Authenticity, Humanness and Contemporary aspects of society in Ronald C White Jr's *A. Lincoln: An analysis of Realistic aspects in Biographical writing*

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Abstract

Biographical writing is an important genre of literature and it is gaining its space in modern society. Due to a rise in the number of successful people & celebrities and an increased eagerness in the minds of people to know more about successful people, the number of biographies published every year has increased. But true and authentic biographies are very few. So it has become inevitable to know, what a reliable and credible biography should consist of. There are a few characteristics of Biographical Writing, which are very essential. Presence of those characteristics, give a true picture of the 'subject of biography' and absence of them make a biography either fiction or dull. Each characteristic fulfils a purpose. This present study aims at identifying those important characteristics and observing them in Ronald C. White Jr's *A. Lincoln*. It is a brief study that provides a clear picture of realistic aspects of biographical writing such as Authenticity, Humanness and contemporary society besides giving a general understanding of a true and authentic biography to the reader.

KEYWORDS: Characteristics, Authenticity, Humanness, Contemporary society, political system.

One important purpose of a biography is to make the reader to experience the narrated characters or events in his life or society. This will enable the reader to look or understand the life from a different perspective. As it is the perspective of a real and successful person, it provides an inspiration or an approach towards life. A reader cannot experience the characters and events if they are fictitious. Only a true narration of a real life can do it. Realistic aspects of characteristics of Biographic writing such as Authenticity, Contemporary society and Humanness will help in depicting a real life.

AUTHENTICITY

“Abe as he really was” – Wall Street Journal

Wall Street Journal reviewed ‘A. Lincoln’ as a comprehensive single volume biography. It mentioned the advantage Ronald C White has, in authoring this book. That is, he has taken the advantage of newly available resources such as legal papers of Lincoln, which were in the oblivion for many years and not available to the writers in the past. Ronald aimed this book at the general reader, by presenting the content without any complexity and with a clear and direct narration.

Ronald has made use of all the available resources. He visited various historical sites to get the first hand information. He has read the books on Abraham Lincoln, which are considered authentic and also books of experts in American history. He included photographs and maps to make the biography a visual narrative. The ‘Selected

Bibliography' of 'A. Lincoln' shows the depth of research Ronald has done on his subject. Abraham Lincoln himself wrote two autobiographical notes for his presidential election campaigning, which were edited and published by different journals and newspapers. The original manuscript of this autobiographical note still exists. It acts as the basic structure, on which the remaining life is carefully developed. Ronald's effort to employ the contents from Lincoln's autobiographical notes makes this biography even more authentic.

In the first half of the 19th century, communication was mainly through letters. Lincoln wrote many personal and official letters and received many letters. All the letters 'from' and 'to' Lincoln, act as the living evidences of his life. There are many online sites showcasing primary sources of Lincoln's life. www.abrahamlincolnonline.org is providing comprehensive information about Lincoln's places, books and speeches etc. 'The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln' and 'Papers of Abraham Lincoln' are some other electronic editions of Lincoln's papers. Ronald collected pictures from, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., National Archives and Records administration, Still Picture Division, College Park, Maryland, Heritage Auction Galleries and Dallas, Texas and so on. Since *A. Lincoln* has references from all the authentic resources available online, it is certain that it is highly authentic and therefore grasps reader's interest.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Every action has it's 'time' and 'space.' Without these two, an action loses it's existential principle, 'cause and effect.' Hence, an action can be considered as a greatest achievement on one occasion and the same action can be regarded as a failure in another context, based on time and place. So the context or social setting of a human's life is very important to understand him in a better manner. Ronald's style of portraying people is very unique. He has given minute details of many characters. Birth, education, profession, beliefs and the relationship with Lincoln of all the important characters are described. Height of Douglas, number of slaves in John Speed's farm, food served in the party after getting Capital to Springfield are some examples for his microscopic narration.

Ronald describes Abraham Lincoln's father Thomas Lincoln as a sturdy man, above five feet ten inches tall with dark hazel eyes, black hair and high cheek bones. Although he lacked formal education, this was not unusual on the early American frontier. He served in the local militia, on juries and became an active member of the Baptist church. He was a man who took the world easy—did not possess much envy. Whereas he gives the clear picture of Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks who lost her mother, when she was young and was brought up by her relatives. After the marriage, Nancy and Thomas lived a few years in Elizabethtown in a log cabin. She gave birth to a girl child and named her, Sarah. 'Clearing the forests and cropping the land,' was the general phenomenon in the lives of people in the frontiers. These clear-cut portrayals of characters by Ronald are what make *A. Lincoln* a unique biography.

While narrating the story of Lincoln, Ronald has included the education system, religious beliefs, political system, health care, working of legislature, customs & habits of

people, transport system and events like Hawk war, secession and Emancipation proclamation etc. So it became not only a biography of Lincoln, but also a historical document about Lincoln's society. The following instances are some examples that illustrate Lincoln's society.

Lincoln attended the schools for very short time. Zachariah Riney was Lincoln's first teacher. Riney taught Lincoln to read and recite aloud. The general instructions taught in the schools in the Hardin County were, restrain card playing & gambling, suppress cussing and not to use any dangerous weapons. Thomas Dilworth's 'New guide to the English tongue,' was the main text book to teach spelling. These detailed references to the teachers and teaching text in the schools are evidences for how schools were at the time of Lincoln. These are a few qualities which Ronald an effective biographical writer.

In certain places, Ronald criticizes the health care system in America. The health care system was still in its initial stages. Any sudden illness or serious disease, literally mean a death. Contagious disease in the community would consume lives of many people. Such an illness claimed the lives of Nancy Lincoln and close relatives of Abraham Lincoln in 1818. Lincoln's sister Sarah lost her life shortly after giving birth to her child.

HUMANNESS

“If you read one book about Lincoln, make it A. Lincoln” – USA Today

USA Today reviewed 'A. Lincoln' as a comprehensive biography which starts with Lincoln's birth and ends with his assassination in 1865. It stated that, even though Ronald is an admirer of his subject, he makes it clear that he is writing about a man, not a deity. This review explains the candidness of the work.

Normally biographies are written about people with some achievements, or people whom the author considers worthy to write about. So most of the times, biographers are admirers of their subjects. There are ample opportunities for the biographers to portray their subject as a super-human or a deity. Such biographies lack reality and the humanness. Without the humanness, biography becomes a fiction. So when the life of a person is portrayed with humanness, the reader can analyze and understand the subject better. Ronald has struck to the basics and showed all the essential humanistic feelings of Lincoln.

“It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of my early life.” (White 8) This was what Lincoln told to Scripps, who had written Lincoln's presidential campaign biography. The above statement can be interpreted in two ways. First, Lincoln would have believed that the years of his early life did not hold any happy or influential moments. Second, Lincoln might have intended to project himself as a self-made man. Lincoln was a common man with some forgettable incidents. In his mid-twenties Lincoln fell in love with Ann Rutledge, the daughter of his house owner. Ann Rutledge was a young, beautiful and intelligent lady. She was engaged to McNeil, but it did not discourage Lincoln to court her. McNeil left for New York and did not return. Lincoln and Ann planned to marry after Lincoln's admission to the bar. In 1835 Ann fell ill and died

of typhoid fever. Lincoln could not bear the separation and isolation. Lincoln was filled with despair and completely out of the world. Later Lincoln tried to form relationship with Mary Owens. It too was failed. Mary Todd was the third and final woman of Lincoln's love-life. In the beginning the relationship between them faced some problems and they parted. Deeply depressed Lincoln wrote a letter to his friend Stuart, saying,

I am the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth.....Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell; I awfully forbade I shall not. To remain as I am is possible; I must die or be better, it appears to me.(White 113)

Ronald puts the readers into the shoes of Lincoln through innumerable quotation from Lincoln himself which makes the readers to get closure with Lincoln's character and his idea of life.

A different incident with similar impact on Lincoln was the death of their second son Eddie Lincoln. Lincoln and Mary were filled with grief and melancholy. Lincoln told Mary, "Eat, Mary, for we must live." (White 180)

Ronald describes Lincoln's amusement and happiness when he had earned a dollar in one day, and he further adds it was similar to every human being. It was so precious to him, he even wrote about it in his autobiographical account. Lincoln in his early twenties for his survival, he worked in some stores. Offutt's store was one among them. In this store liquor was sold. Though he did not drink, he worked. Lincoln had to put his personal opinions away and work for money. It is a general scenario that takes place in the lives of many people. Lincoln was engaged by Vincent A. Bogue to guide his steamer on Sangamon River. Lincoln received forty dollars as remuneration. In 1833, Lincoln worked as a postmaster and it was not a full time job. Whenever he was free he worked in his Ellis's store or got employed in farm work. Lincoln borrowed money from Coleman Smoot. Smoot was Lincoln's friend. Lincoln felt he needed decent clothing, when he enters the Illinois legislature for the first time. But he did not have sufficient money. So he borrowed money from Smoot and bought black coats and white shirts.

Ronald also gives the account of Lincoln's political life and his humanness at the office. In the initial days of his presidential term, there were many visitors to White House, making their appeals, pleas, requests and suggestions for positions to be filled in the government. They were too many for Lincoln. Lincoln, who lobbied for his friends in the past, was then feeling it as embarrassing. Lincoln told to one of his friends, "It was bad enough in Springfield, but it was child's play compared with this tussle here. I hardly have a chance to eat or sleep. I am fair game for that hungry lot." (White 386)

The contemporary society had a great impact on Lincoln. Though his moral values were at peak always, in the early half of his life, Lincoln was not completely prepared to accept the complete equality between whites and blacks. There was a possibility that, Lincoln might have considered blacks was not equal to whites in terms of education, culture, mental progress etc. Lincoln could accept only the equality of blacks in enjoying freedom.

George Robertson, the author of ‘Scrap Book on Law and Politics, Men and Times’ had presented his book as a gift to Lincoln. He read it and found a speech of Robertson, mentioning about ‘peaceful extinction of slavery.’ Lincoln had seen failures of many great people in bringing peaceful extinction for slavery. Lincoln’s thoughts regarding it were,

The autocrat of all of Russia will resign his crown, and proclaim his subjects free republicans sooner than our American masters will voluntarily give up their slaves.....The problem is too mighty for me; May God, in his mercy, superintend the solution. (White 214)

Lincoln spoke aggressively to the people on a few occasions. One such occasion was a meeting with a Committee of Baltimore. Baltimore was a town with a medium-range of population and it was a pro-slavery town. During the civil war Union troops had to pass through Baltimore to reach Washington. Citizens of Baltimore were angry about the abolitionist Union troops, so they threw stones at the soldiers. Many were killed and more were injured. Lincoln was disappointed with it and he said to the Baltimore Committee,

Your citizens attack troops sent to the defense of the Government and yet you would have me break my oath and surrender the Government without a blow..... Our men are not moles, and can’t dig under the earth; they are not birds, and can’t fly through the air. (White 414)

After the completion of reading ‘A. Lincoln,’ a reader feels, all the said things in the book are possible to a person who is determined, devoted and destined for a purpose. Lincoln was a person with all those qualities. That means, Ronald is successful in making his book a true and authentic work. It is not easy to portray a life as it is. Ronald has the skills required, and the book is an exhibition of those skills.

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